

SYLVIA THRUPP: THE MAKING OF AN EARLY SOCIAL HISTORIAN

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In 1909, Sylvia Thrupp, together with her parents, Edgar and Katherine, her sister Beatrice and her brother Adrian, emigrated from Surbiton (a suburb of south London) where Sylvia had been born, to Kamloops in British Columbia. Her father, Edgar, who remained important in her life, (they lived together in Vancouver after her mother died in 1921) was a civil engineer who had been educated at King's College London in 1879-82.¹ Edgar came from a roving colonial family, typical of the period. His mother, i.e. Sylvia's grandmother, had been born in Calcutta and she met her husband in Adelaide, South Australia, where he had presumably gone to practice law (he qualified as a barrister). All six of their children (including Sylvia's father Edgar, who was the youngest) were born in Adelaide between 1856 and 1863. All the family came back to England apart from the eldest son who remained in Adelaide. Sylvia's mother, Katherine

Fooks, on the other hand, came from a family of barristers and physicians who had been working in London for several generations. For her the move to British Columbia must have been more radical.

Sylvia's parents had been married for nine years and already had two children, when Sylvia, their third child, was born, on September 3, 1903, in a modest, recently built house in the quiet and supremely respectable suburb of Surbiton in south London: the house was named "Fairholme" and the street was Balaclava Road.² Surbiton was linked to London by a half-hour journey on the southern railway. Perhaps Edgar worked in London, but he may have considered that his prospects as an engineer were brighter in the developing western territories of Canada. Perhaps he went to act as the engineer on a particular project and then decided to stay. He was a man of 46, his wife was 38

and young Sylvia was six when they packed their bags and abandoned leafy Surbiton for British Columbia.

The impression from looking at Sylvia's family tree is of a middle of the road, middle class, professional English family, of modest means but some education. Had she remained in England, Sylvia would probably have been sent to one of the recently established schools of the Girls Public Day School Company which were springing up like mushrooms in the rapidly developing suburbs of south London where middle class professionals were choosing to live. There is nothing in Sylvia's family tree to suggest either wealth or gentry or aristocratic connections.

The family moved to Kamloops, a town on the railway line across the Rockies in British Columbia. It must have been there that Sylvia was educated, and it was there, in 1921, that Sylvia's mother died. In the same year Sylvia went to the University of British Columbia where she graduated, four years later, with a First Class honors degree in History. She

then studied for a Diploma in Education (1926) and taught "History, Latin etc.,"³ for two years in High Schools before securing a part-time assistantship in the History department at UBC. This enabled her to study for her MA, which she completed in 1929. For her ninety-seven page dissertation, she chose to write about the "History of the Cranbrook District in East Kootenay": this was a social and economic history of the region which she completed under the direction of W. N. Sage who was to continue to play a formative part in her academic career. Those who know some of Thrupp's later work will not be surprised that there were 917 notes to this ninety-seven page dissertation, i.e. about ten notes on every page! There were also maps and appendices.⁴

It must have been during this time that Sylvia developed the idea of working for a doctorate in medieval English history. She may have been attracted to the study of English history because of her British parents and the remnants of her family left behind there, or she may have been encouraged in this

by some fellow colleague or teacher at UBC. Whatever the trigger, in 1929 she secured a scholarship of \$1400 for postgraduate study in the University of London. And so she arrived in London in the Autumn of 1929 and registered at University College London to work under the supervision of the sixteenth-century historian Professor John Neale.⁵ How she set about finding a thesis topic is not known but we do know that she attended seminars at the recently-established Institute of Historical Research (IHR). In fact, she was the sole student for the first term at Hilda Johnstone's Introductory course on Thursday afternoons. Sylvia also attended another introductory seminar on Saturday mornings; a seminar on London history with Eliza Jeffries Davies on Wednesday evenings and, what must have been the high point of her week, a Monday evening seminar on Medieval Trade with Michael (Munia) Postan.⁶ Who it was who helped her to develop her thesis topic is not clear since it did not lie in the area of John Neale's interest.⁷ It may have been Jeffries Davies, or Postan, or Postan together

with Eileen Power, who was at that time a lecturer at the London School of Economics (LSE). Although the records at University College London state that the topic of Thrupp's thesis was *The Grocers and the Mercers in the Fifteenth Century*, when the thesis was finally presented its title was *A Study of the Merchant Class of Medieval London in the Fifteenth Century with special reference to the Company of Grocers*.⁸

But Sylvia's scholarship of \$1400 for postgraduate study may well have been badly hit by the Slump and Depression of 1929/30, and it was clear that she was not sure how she was to be able to afford to remain in Britain for a second year to complete her research. In June 1930, the Academic Council of the University of London considered an application from Sylvia asking permission to study for the second term of the next session at the University of California and to interrupt her studies for the following three terms because "the student's finances are exhausted, but she hopes to be able to return after the lapse of four terms."⁹ But whatever the financial crisis

was, she was able to weather it and remain in London. In the second year of her research, she continued to attend Jeffries Davies' seminar at the IHR and that of Power and Postan at the LSE. It may have been financial pressure which drove Sylvia Thrupp to work with remarkable tenacity, for the thesis was presented and examined by June 1931: that is, she had completed the research and written her doctoral thesis in less than two years. The examiners were Michael Postan, who must have taken over as her supervisor, A. H. Thomas (the archivist at the Corporation of London Record Office) and Eileen Power. In those days the supervisor chaired the viva, and so it will have been Thomas and Power who were the real examiners. Out of the twenty-four people who were examined for a London doctorate at this time, four were failed and of the remaining twenty, four (including Sylvia) were requested, before publishing their theses, "to confer with the examiners in regard to certain suggestions they have made."¹⁰ It may be that the examiners had objected to the extremely scruffy appearance of the thesis:

the copy in the University of London Library is full of crossings out in the typing, corrections in ink and other signs of speed or casualness.¹¹ There may have been financial pressure on Thrupp, but her Guggenheim application in 1943, i.e. twelve years later, is also rather untidy. It looks as if she never really mastered the typewriter, and certainly not the combination of a typewriter and an application form.

In order to remain in England after the completion of her thesis, Thrupp applied for The Metcalfe Studentship for Women tenable at the London School of Economics and worth £100 *per annum*. Ten candidates were interviewed and Sylvia shared the studentship with another women. She reapplied the following year and, again was awarded a half share of the studentship (i.e. £50). The interviewing panel of six members included the Vice-Chancellor of the University and three representatives from the LSE including Power.¹² It is clear that Sylvia Thrupp was deeply indebted to Power for both intellectual and, perhaps, financial, support. It

is significant that when her book on the merchant class of medieval London finally appeared in 1948, it was dedicated to the memory of Eileen Power.

Sylvia Thrupp cannot have lived in London, however frugally, on £50 a year. She continued to collect material for her broader study of the merchant class of medieval London and was a faithful attendee at the Power and Postan seminar at the LSE both in 1931-2 and again in 1932-3. There is no suggestion, however, that she did any teaching while she was in London, although she may have done. It may be that one of the ways in which Thrupp was able to earn money during these years was by being commissioned to write the history of the Worshipful Company of Bakers. Frederick Mostyn, who was Master of the Bakers Company in 1931-2, had decided to commission a new history of the company as his leaving gift as master (it was more usual to give a piece of silver). Mostyn must have asked around for a suitable author and it may have been A. H. Thomas at Guildhall, or

the Power/Postan partnership, who suggested Sylvia Thrupp. There is no record of what she was paid for this work, but by February 1933 the text was complete and Mostyn presented it to the Company. The costs of printing the text (150 *de luxe* copies and 350 ordinary) was borne by the Company and the book appeared later in 1933.¹³ It was a considerable work of scholarship and, characteristically, was ahead of its time. It is not the typical company history with a focus upon the building of the hall, the holders of office and the collection of silver. It is, instead, an account of how and where bakers worked and the practical and effective regulation of the craft.¹⁴

In 1934-5, Thrupp secured a one-year Canadian SSRC post-doctoral training Fellowship worth \$2000 per annum to visit universities in the Eastern United States (Columbia, Harvard, Yale) and Michigan and Chicago “to study research under other disciplines” and, in particular, “American approaches to problems of regional variations in social structure.”¹⁵ Although this

was the ostensible purpose of the fellowship, it would appear that, in fact, Thrupp was looking for a job. In a letter to her "mentor," Walter Sage at UBC, she describes how she was "slightly discouraged by the extent of anti-feminist feeling in the eastern universities." She says that at McGill they had appointed a woman in history whom they didn't like and so had decided never to take that risk again, and the head of History at Toronto, Chester Martin, had made it clear to her that he would only appoint men.¹⁶ Thrupp's belief that History departments in the major research universities (especially in Canada) were reluctant to appoint women to permanent posts is borne out by Harold Innis, the Head of the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto who, in his letter of support for Thrupp's application for a Guggenheim fellowship, wrote that her work in the medieval field had been greatly handicapped by her difficulty in getting a post in a university with library facilities: "I am afraid that inability to get such an appointment has been a result of the refusal of

most institutions to appoint women."¹⁷ And it was Innis who was later (in 1944) to offer Thrupp her first, albeit temporary, job in his department in Toronto. But, for whatever reason, Thrupp's search for a job in an established university in 1934-5 came to nothing, and when this year was over, the prison house began to close around her. She returned to British Columbia where she remained as an annually-appointed instructor in the history department from 1935 until 1944, on a salary rising only from \$1600 to \$2000. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Thrupp had been able to return twice to England, in the summers of 1937 and 1938, to carry out further research in London, and to collaborate with Eileen Power in a projected economic history of London. But, as Thrupp observed in 1943, "That particular project is now, of course, indefinitely deferred."¹⁸ The role of her mentor, Walter Sage, the Head of the Department at UBC, is a little hard to understand. Obviously he supported Thrupp to the extent of providing her with a rather low-level

job in his department, and during the war she took over an increasing number of his departmental tasks, including the criticism and supervision of student theses.¹⁹ Yet, she was not promoted until 1944, when she had already been offered a post by Innis in Toronto. Sage taught the local history of British Columbia, and, in her application to the Guggenheim Foundation, Thrupp wrote that she had not worked on the economic history of British Columbia, where there was still a great deal to be done, because “my co-operation in the latter field was not desired.”²⁰ So perhaps Sage was not such a supporter or mentor as he once had been: it may be significant that he was not one of those whom Thrupp named as a referee when making her Guggenheim application.²¹ Without doubt, securing the Guggenheim fellowship provided Sylvia Thrupp with a way out of UBC with a better salary, and into universities with more medieval historians and better-endowed libraries.

After leaving Vancouver in 1944 for Toronto, and thence to Chicago, and finally to

Michigan, Sylvia Thrupp never returned to work at UBC. Her father continued to live in Vancouver until his death in 1951, and Thrupp sometimes returned to teach summer schools.²² It is worth remembering that Sylvia Thrupp did not have a secure university appointment until 1945, when, at the age of forty-two, she went to Chicago. Moreover, by this date, she had published a book, one very substantial article and four other articles.²³ Her remarkable, indeed seminal, book *The Merchant Class of Medieval London (1300-1500)* was to be published by the University of Chicago Press three years later, in 1948. But the lean years of heavy teaching, the separation from her source materials caused by the Second World War, the lack of a good research library, the death in 1941 of her true mentor, Eileen Power, and, perhaps, her own developing inclination, all combined to lead her away from the history of medieval London and into the fields of comparative studies in history and sociology. But she had already left an indelible imprint on the study of medieval London and her book

is still in print over fifty years after it first appeared.²⁴

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END NOTES

¹ Edgar Thrupp's entrance form is in the archives, King's College, London.

² I am grateful to Jessica Freeman for help in tracing Sylvia's family. Beatrice Muriel Thrupp was born in 1895, and her brother, Adrian Cracroft Thrupp, in 1897.

³ John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, NYC: Archives: copy of Thrupp's application for an award, dated 12 November 1943.

⁴ Information from copy held in Main Library, University of British Columbia, Ref.: LE 3 B7 1929 A8 T5 H5.

⁵ University of London Archives, Senate Houses, London: Minutes of Senate (ST 2/2/46) Jan. 1930, no. 2366.

⁶ Information about the seminars held, and those who attended them, derived from register books kept at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

⁷ Paul Brand has suggested to me that the substantial biographical appendix to be found in *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* may owe something to Neale who, under the influence of Sir Lewis Namier, was writing the biographies of Elizabethan MPs.

⁸ University College London: Administrative Archive: Records of Former Students. Copy of thesis deposited in the Senate House Library, University of London.

⁹ University of London Archives: Academic Council Minutes (AC 1/1/30) no. 738.

¹⁰ University of London Archives: Senate Minutes, (ST/2/2/47) 15 July 1931, no.3194.

¹¹ I can compare Thrupp's thesis with that presented two years later by [Dame] Kitty Anderson on "The treatment of vagrancy and the relief of the poor and destitute in the Tudor period, based upon the local records of London to 1552 and Hull to 1576," which was immaculate. Anderson, who also attended the IHR seminars, went on to be the outstanding headmistress of the North London Collegiate School for Girls.

¹² University of London Archives: Senate Minutes, (ST 2/2/48) 21 October 1931, nos. 134, 135; (ST 2/2/49) 26 October 1932 nos. 178, 180.

¹³ Sylvia Thrupp, *A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Bakers of London* (Croyden, 1933); Guildhall Library: MS 5177(16), Bakers' Company Records, Minutes of the Court, pp. 217, 219, 221, 223, 226, 230, 231.

¹⁴ Thrupp's account of the Bakers, was really the first of its kind until Elspeth Veale's *The English London Fur Trade in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1966), but this was not a commissioned company history.

¹⁵ Guggenheim application; see n.3.

¹⁶ Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), p.197, citing the Walter Sage archive at UBC.

¹⁷ Guggenheim application.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Boutiler and Prentice, *Creating Historical Memory*, 220.

²⁰ Guggenheim application.

²¹ Boutiler and Prentice, *Creating Historical Memory*, 221.

²² Barbara Hanawalt believes that Thrupp's father was a failed engineer and a failed apple farmer which explains why he was unable to help his daughter financially: paper given at Medieval Academy of America Meeting, Seattle, April 3, 2004.

²³ The articles included: "The Grocers of London: A Study of Distributive Trade," "The Pedigree and Prospects of Local History," "Social Control in the Medieval Town," "Medieval Gilds Reconsidered," and "The Problem of Conservatism in Fifteenth-Century England." See bibliography following for publication details.

²⁴ Ann Arbor paperback, published by the University of Michigan.



Be war, ye wicemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yt this day men may ensaumple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me."

— the Narrator in Chaucer's
Legend of Good Women

